

THE QUEENSLAND ELECTION 2012: A VOTERS' FIRESTORM



I. BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS

The official Latin Motto for the State of Queensland is “*Audax At Fidelis*”, translated as “*Bold But Faithful.*” Both concepts were severely tested and sharply called into question by the historic and devastating result of the 2012 Queensland State Election. The heavily defeated Australian Labor Party Government of former Premier Anna Bligh attempted to be bold but was regarded by hundreds of thousands of voters as lacking in faithfulness. It was this clear perception of Labor in the eyes of voters as being out-of-touch, incompetent and unwilling to listen that cost the ALP Government in Queensland what is the worst electoral defeat in the Party’s own history. It was only the sixth time a sitting Government had been ousted since 1915, with the Parliamentary majority given to the Liberal National Party being the highest ever recorded in the State’s 152 year electoral history.

The following Table shows the general trend of results.

| Election/Votes | LNP | ALP | Katter's Party |
|-----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| 2009 Election | 34 Seats | 51 Seats | - |
| 2012 Election | 77 Seats | 7 Seats | 2 Seats |
| Votes Gained | 1,115,303 | 599,122 | 256,633 |
| % Of Vote | 49.85% | 26.78% | 11.47% |
| % Swing | Plus 8.25% | Minus 15.47% | Plus 11.47% |

The extent of the political destruction overtaking Labor can also be seen from the large number of former Ministers of the Crown who humiliatingly lost their seats.

| Minister | Portfolio | Seat |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| Andrew Fraser | Deputy Premier | Mt Coot-tha |
| Stirling Hinchcliffe | Infrastructure | Stafford |
| Karen Struthers | Women | Algester |
| Geoff Wilson | Health | Ferny Grove |
| Jan Jarratt | Tourism | Whitsunday |
| Phil Reeves | Sports | Mansfield |
| Craig Wallace | Main Roads/Fisheries | Thuringowa |
| Vicki Darling | Environment | Sandgate |
| Cameron Dick | Education | Greenslopes |

[Source: BRISBANE TIMES, 24 MARCH 2012.]

The pressing question in the minds of ALP and LNP officials as well as in those of political analysts is **why did Labor lose the Election so badly?**

Upon reflection, there appear to have been some seven key factors which cost the ALP office and which handed Government to the LNP in such an overwhelming manner.

Reasons As To Why the ALP lost

- ❖ **Mishandling of the Traveston Dam Project**
- ❖ **Reluctance by Premier Bligh to dismiss poorly performing Ministers of the Crown**
- ❖ **A Perception of Tired Incumbency through 20 out of the past 22 years in Office**
- ❖ **Increased Costs to Consumers of Electricity and Car Registration Fees**
- ❖ **Bungled New Health Payroll System in March 2010**
- ❖ **Ill-Advised and Disingenuous Sale of Public Assets**
- ❖ **Backfiring of ALP Strategy of Attacking Mr Newman's Probity and Honesty in Financial Dealings and Political Donations.**

[Sources: BRISBANE TIMES, 26 MARCH 2012; PAUL WILLIAMS, ONLINE OPINION, 4 APRIL 2012.]

II. ECONOMIC FACTORS

Queensland is Australia's second largest and third most populous State, generating 19.5% of Australia's GDP – with an economy built on mining, agriculture, tourism and financial services.

Queensland's Gross State Product (GSP) measured A\$258 billion in 2011; with a Workforce of 2.3 million and Unemployment in December 2011 standing at 5.6%, compared to the National Rate of 5.3%. In 2010-2011, Queensland's largest single export was coal (comprising 49% of exports) and Queensland's largest trading

partner was Japan (24% of exports.) The State's Proportion of Liabilities to Government Revenue for 2011-2012 stands at 110%.¹

The 2011-2012 Queensland Budget consists of a total of A\$47.1 billion, with Health Expenditure allocated 25% of the Budget and Education Expenditure allocated 22% of the Budget. Total borrowings for 2011-2012 are fixed at A\$19.2 billion,² which constitutes a perturbing 40.6% of the overall Budget.

On 4 September 2011, Standard and Poors downgraded Queensland's International Credit Rating from AAA to AA+ ('stable'). This move caused considerable anxiety amongst senior officials, Ministers of the Crown and the general public. Although far from catastrophic, the downgrading indicated to many Queenslanders that the Bligh Government was in deep financial trouble and, rather than being open and direct with the people, chose to 'bluff' its way through, maintaining with some element of truthfulness that little had changed.

Standard and Poors Credit Analyst Anna Hughes, when announcing the downgrade, remarked as follows:

*"Given the substantial impact of natural disasters on the state's economy and fiscal position, we consider that upward momentum for the rating is unlikely over the short-term. An upgrade in the medium-to-long term is possible once the structural improvements introduced by the Queensland Government begin to be reflected in the State's budgetary performance and debt burden."*³

¹ QUEENSLAND TREASURY CORPORATION – 2012.

² QUEENSLAND TREASURY CORPORATION – 2012.

³ REUTERS, 4 September 2011.

III. MAJOR POLITICAL PARTIES – SELECTED POLICIES PUT FORWARD DURING CAMPAIGN

Given that a political party's election promises are an important factor in its being put either into Government or into Opposition, it is instructive to examine ALP and LNP stated policies across five major areas, involving community, education, work training, health, and infrastructure/mining townships.

| ALP Policies | LNP Policies |
|--|---|
| Report All Donations over A\$1,000 within 48 Hours of Receipt | Repeal Same-Sex Civil Unions Bill |
| Allocation of A\$3 million for Entrepreneurs under 30 years of age | Cut 'red tape' by 20% |
| Allocation of 50% of gas royalties to Education | Allocate A\$86 million for 10,000 new apprenticeships |
| Revamp Health Structure into two entities, for greater efficiency and resource allocation | Allocate A\$16 million to reduce Hospital Waiting Lists |
| Allocate A\$300 million over three years to make resource-rich towns more liveable. | Allocate A\$170 million from Royalties to mining communities |

IV. LEADER PROFILES



Anna Maria Bligh (born 1960) made political history on 21 March 2009, when she became the first elected woman Premier in Australia. She served as Premier from 13 September 2007, following the resignation of her predecessor, Peter Beattie.

In July 2005, she celebrated 10 years as the Member for South Brisbane. As Deputy Premier, she also held the portfolios of Treasurer and Minister for Infrastructure – overseeing a State Budget of A\$33 billion. Before that, she was Queensland's first woman Education Minister.

Prior to entering State Parliament, Ms Bligh worked in community organizations, as a State Public Servant and in Industrial Relations. She received an Arts degree from The University of Queensland in 1980.

In the wake of the 2012 Election loss, she announced her immediate resignation as Leader of the Parliamentary Labor Party, as well as from Parliament and retired completely from politics as from 30 March 2012.

In her personal life, she is married to Mr Greg Withers, a senior public official, with two sons, Joe and Oliver, both of whom attended Brisbane State High School. She is also a direct descendant of Captain William Bligh, known for the mutiny on “The Bounty”.

In the State Election of 2009, Ms Bligh received 14,697 votes or 65.01% of valid votes in the Electorate of South Brisbane, easily defeating her LNP opponent for the seat Ms Mary Carrol who received 7,911 votes or 34.99% of total valid votes. This outcome was significantly changed in the 2012 Election, where Ms Bligh, on as yet incomplete figures, received 9,003 valid votes or 55.58% of the count; whilst her LNP opponent Mr Clem Grehan received 7,196 valid votes or 44.42% of the count. Ms Bligh thus suffered a negative voting swing of 9.43% against her in her own seat.⁴

⁴ QUEENSLAND ELECTORAL COMMISSION, State Election Results 2009 and 2012



Campbell Newman (born 1963), Member for Ashgrove, is an Engineer by training, having spent 13 years in the Australian Army retiring in 1993 with the rank of Major. He is married to wife, Lisa, with two daughters, Rebecca and Sarah.

Elected Lord Mayor of Brisbane in March 2004, Mr Newman remained in that position until April 2011, when he resigned to contest the seat of Ashgrove. As Mayor, Mr Newman adopted a high-profile, “can do” image; concentrating on such areas of Council responsibility as transport, roads, swimming pools and “green” electricity.

Following the 2012 Election, he is the 38th Premier of Queensland, having been sworn in by Her Excellency Ms Penelope Wensley AC, Governor of Queensland, 26 March 2012.

He states that he intends to focus on rebuilding Queensland's economy and setting its finances in order.

Although never having held a seat in the State Parliament before, Mr Newman won the seat of Ashgrove, previously held by Labor's Ms Kate Jones, who comfortably won the seat in the 2009 Election, gaining 57.01% of the valid vote, as against the LNP candidate, Mr Scott McConnel, who gained 42.90% of the valid vote. In 2012, Mr Newman, as the endorsed LNP Candidate, gained 56.32% of the valid votes for the seat, overcoming Ms Jones' result of 43.68% of the valid vote – a notable reversal of 13.42% in favour of Mr Newman and against Ms Jones.⁵

V. ALP AND LNP ELECTORAL FORTUNES

ALP

The Australian Labor Party has existed for 121 years and has survived the most tumultuous ructions, upheavals and vicissitudes. Just four years ago, it was firmly in Government in every state as well as federally.⁶

The Bligh Government is the fourth State Labor Government to lose office in the last four years and the ALP is barely clinging to office federally in a shaky Coalition with the Greens and a few Independents. The 2012 Election decimated the ALP beyond belief. The result was no surprise, although the swing was far bigger than was expected. One of the factors causing Labor's "wipe out" was the debt it accumulated, amounting to A\$85 billion.

⁵ QUEENSLAND ELECTORAL COMMISSION – State Election Results 2009 and 2012.

⁶ Ross McMullin, SYDNEY MORNING HERALD, 31 March 2012.

It seems that one term too many has proven semi-fatal for Labor and deeply dysfunctional for Queensland. Some observers are of the view that the result is an unmitigated disaster so far as the effective functioning of Parliament is concerned. Such commentators point out that, lacking any form of potent Opposition, Parliamentary Sessions “... will henceforth resemble those of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR.” ⁷

LNP

If one goes by state-level election results, it is quite clear that ideology plays a minor role, if at all. Campbell Newman, in Jack Waterford’s opinion, is, in conventional Liberal Party terms, a liberal in social policy and is unlikely to be dogmatic about it. ⁸

Successful state politics has seemed to have become centred upon management, perceptions of competence and a few demonstrably successful “signature” policies such as trains, dams or expressways. Rarely is it about doctrine, still less about a broad philosophy of Government or any aspect of personality. Successful state politicians, in Waterford’s opinion, want voters to be comfortable about them and their instincts, but not necessarily to love them or to know the names of their wives/husbands and children. ⁹

Significantly, on Election eve at the LNP Poll Party, as the voting figures rolled in, it became clear that this was not going to be just a victory but a political massacre. The mood at the LNP celebration was surprisingly, strangely, restrained. ¹⁰

⁷ Election Comment 26 March 2012 <http://www.crikey.com.au/2012/03/26/crikey-says> Accessed 6 April 2012.

⁸ Jack Waterford, Election Comment, SYDNEY MORNING HERALD, 28 March 2012.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Since his installation as Premier, Mr Newman has indicated that he is a leader who intends to lead from the front and will not excuse below-par performances by any of his Ministers or of their Departmental Heads. He has said that Ministers will be dismissed if they make bad decisions, mislead the community or fail to act with due diligence. “If that Minister doesn’t perform, they will go, and that’s exactly what I told the Directors-General yesterday”, the new Premier said.¹¹ At the same time, Mr Newman said his Ministers were inheriting “a complete shemozzle” from the former Labor Government. The Premier continued, saying, “I’m not going to sack a Minister in the first year...”¹²

VI. CONCLUSION

The result of the 2012 Queensland State Election has been a political “laying of waste” for the ALP and an exultant victory for the LNP. It has spelt the end for Anna Bligh and the beginning of Campbell Newman as the people’s choice. The state of the economy, burgeoning public debt, mishandled payroll for medical and nursing staff at all Queensland public hospitals and finally, public bitterness over the issue of the sale of public assets – intended to raise monies for welfare, health and other projects – after having promised that no such sale would be undertaken. Labor had stayed “too long at the fair.” It was perceived as being dishonest, out-of-touch, incompetent and needlessly malevolent in attacking the character and probity of the former Opposition Leader. ALP electoral strategy thus failed in its objectives,

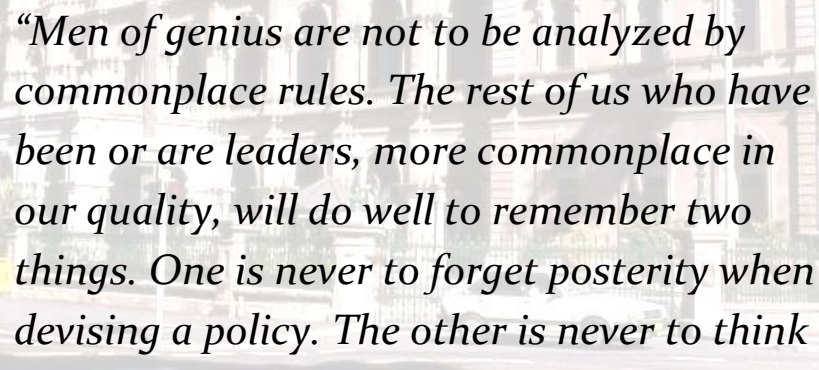
¹¹ “Restore Public Trust in Government: Newman Sets Team’s Mission”, BRISBANE TIMES, 28 March 2012.

¹² Ibid. For the benefit of non-Australian readers, the terms “shemozzle” and “sack” have the following meanings in everyday, colloquial Australian parlance – a shemozzle means a state of chaos, or confusion or a complete muddle; whilst to sack someone is to peremptorily and abruptly dismiss an appointee from their work position.

objecting needlessly to the growing likelihood of the first LNP Government in 20 years. Voters will appreciate and accept strong leadership, provided it does not take itself too seriously, though will punish severely any Government of whatever political party which voters see as attempting to manipulate them, or worse, resorting to “cut-throat” attack advertising along American lines to gain their support at the ballot box.

It is edifying to close this discussion with reference to two of the most influential political leaders Australia has ever produced, one Liberal and one Labor – that is, Robert Gordon Menzies and Edward Gough Whitlam, both long-serving Federal Parliamentarians and both distinguished Members of the Bar.

Menzies once observed with stylish polish that:



“Men of genius are not to be analyzed by commonplace rules. The rest of us who have been or are leaders, more commonplace in our quality, will do well to remember two things. One is never to forget posterity when devising a policy. The other is never to think of posterity when making a speech.” [Robert Menzies, Founder of the Liberal Party of Australia in 1948-1949.]

Whitlam also once opined with wry scepticism:

“The punters know that the horse named Morality rarely gets past the post, whereas the nag named Self-Interest always runs a good race.” [Gough Whitlam, Reformer of the Australian Labor Party especially between 1969 and 1972.]

